

Interview with Julia Reichert and Jim Klein New Day's way

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New Day Films is a cooperative distribution group for feminist films, and it has been remarkably successful in creating an alternative for politically committed filmmakers. To find out more about New Day, we interviewed two of its founders—Julia Reichert and Jim Klein, who made *GROWING UP FEMALE* (1971) and *METHADONE* (1974, see review and interview in JUMP CUT 5).

KLEINHANS: What is New Day, and how did it get started?

REICHERT: New Day is now a cooperative for feminist films, run by the filmmakers. It really started with *GROWING UP FEMALE*, with that one film. That's because Jim and I made it in 1971 to be used by the women's movement, by organizers, by consciousness raising groups, and for outreach to get new women in the women's movement. So it was very much an organizing film. When we realized it was a good film -- which was about a year after it was finished and we saw it could be used all over the country, then came distribution.

So what did we do? We went to New York. And I carried the film around and showed it to various distributors like Grove Press, McGraw Hill, and so forth. Then they started showing us contracts. We realized we'd be signing away control of the film for 7 years and only get 25-30%. And they'd see the film, and it was clear they weren't in it for the same reason we were. We asked them what would happen if a movement group wrote and said they didn't have enough money for the rental. The distributors said, "Too bad, they'd have to get the money." It was really wrong. We'd heard about independent distribution in England, so we decided to try to distribute it ourselves.

LESAGE: What about cooperative distribution at that time?

REICHERT: The Filmmaker's Coop was so into underground and experimental film that we could see our potential audience would never get that catalogue.

MARTINEAU: And Newsreel?

REICHERT: Newsreel didn't want the film. Actually I should say New York Newsreel. The women in New York Newsreel reacted very strongly against it. Later a lot of other Newsreel groups picked it up.

KLEIN: Every single Newsreel but New York carried it. But when it first came to a national decision, the other Newsreels hadn't seen it and took New York Newsreel's word.

REICHERT: Actually when we thought of national distribution at first, we thought of Newsreel. That was the highest aspiration we had. And there was American Documentary Films, too, but we'd heard bad things about them. So, it became clear we'd have to do it ourselves. At that point we had no money at all. We were still in college and Jim had a year to finish. So, we had to go into debt. It is quite expensive to distribute by yourself. Of course everyone said "Forget it, you'll lose your shirts."

LESAGE: When was that?

REICHERT: We decided in spring of '71 and the first mailing went out that fall.

LESAGE: That was the red and blue poster.

REICHERT: Yes.

LESAGE: I remember because we put it on our kitchen wall.

REICHERT: In fact Jim and I printed that ourselves. We learned how to run a press to do it and save money.

KLEIN: It was a terrible old movement press. We ran 15,000.

LESAGE: Where did you send it? Ours came to the women's house in Bloomington.

REICHERT: We learned all these things like where do you get lists. A lot of names came from contacts because I traveled around a lot that spring with the film and just asked everybody (like I was doing last night at the showing of METHADONE) for names and addresses of people who might want to use it: teachers, women's centers, and what not. I went to different women's publications and asked for lists. Basically I was trying to get a list of the women's movement. We typed the whole thing up and

also bought some college lists, like of the sociology departments at every college in the country. Then we had friends and students help us stuff them and lick them. We did it ourselves and had boxes full of them all over our apartment. I guess you have some idea of that with JUMP CUT.

It's like sending out a net. You don't know what you'll get. So we started getting replies, rentals, preview requests, mail. The ten prints we had were booked up right away and we had to get five more. That's when our lab bills started getting really high and we didn't have any money to pay them. You have to count on that, that you'll lay out a lot of money before any will start coming in. We were lucky because the guy who ran the lab liked us and the film, and he tolerated us not paying right away.

LESAGE: That mailing came at the right time because I was sort of the film person in the women's movement in a university town and the poster was sent over to my house. I liked the poster so I put it up. I remember all that year I'd be getting phone calls about films for women's events and I'd keep recommending GROWING UP FEMALE because I had the poster up, even though at first I hadn't seen the film. I think your film got its greatest exposure then in the school year '71-'72. After that other films started coming in and GROWING UP FEMALE went on to a different audience than just campuses. When did it start reaching a larger group of people?

REICHERT: In '71-'72 we were getting 30-40 bookings a month, but that was Harvard, Brandeis, Vassar, and women's centers. The next year we started noticing Y's and churches, nursing schools, technical schools.

KLEIN: Now it's not many Eastern colleges, but junior colleges, catholic high schools ...

LESAGE: In Chicago people get it from the public library.

MARTINEAU: In Toronto, too.

REICHERT: That's the best way because then people can get it for free. It's no hassle for us.

MARTINEAU: How much do you sell prints to libraries for?

REICHERT: \$375.

MARTINEAU: Is there a different price for women's groups?

REICHERT: Well, we've sold it to movement groups for \$200-250. We usually sell them a slightly used print: one that's been out a few times but is still perfectly good. We have a sliding scale on rentals too. The whole first year we were distributing, we made hardly any sales.

KLEIN: One. The New York Public Library saw it and immediately

bought it on the third day we took it around.

REICHERT: And we previewed like mad. We'd call these libraries up and go out there.

LESAGE: Libraries have only bought women's films in the last year here in Chicago.

REICHERT: Back then these male librarians would say "We're not interested in the subject of women." Really that out-and-out! It was just infuriating,

KLEIN: Or they would get together a screening committee of professional women.

REICHERT: And they'd say, "Oh, you're just showing these down-and-out women who don't have the sense to do anything with their lives anyway." So what we'd have to do basically is convince them of the worth of the women's movement. We'd have to argue feminist politics with them. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't. But what started happening after a while was that the movement and the film became better known and more accepted.

The first six months, from fall '71 to spring '72, it was just Jim and I, but then we realized it would make sense to have other women do the same thing with us. We could share mail costs and tasks.

We met Amalie Rothschild; in fact we lived in her apartment in New York for two months. She's very nice and interested in film and in film distribution. Amalie had just finished IT HAPPENS TO US. She also had WOO WHO? MAY WILSON. And we saw Liane Brandon's ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE, which she was distributing herself. So we drove up to Boston to see her. And we talked to her for a couple of days. She agreed to give the idea of cooperative distribution a try. So that's when we started New Day Films. All four of us gradually ironed out the natural problems that arose.

LESAGE: You decided it would be a coop for filmmakers and you wouldn't just be a distributor of women's films.

KLEIN: That came partly from the idea that filmmakers should distribute their films: particularly political filmmakers, in order to know their audiences, to complete the process. Making the film is just the first part. We met a lot of independent filmmakers in New York who were very isolated from the world and never saw their audience.

REICHERT: It's very much a political decision to see filmmaking that way, as a process that includes the audience.

KLEIN: Yes. And it's a hard decision because it means making less films.

It means the filmmaking process is more than getting an idea, getting money and finishing a film. It means doing that and then going a step farther.

LESAGE: But isn't that a high for you?

KLEIN: Definitely.

REICHERT: Yes. It means a tremendous amount to get letters from so many of the people who have used our films, to get their responses and ideas. And also to be able to talk with people before they show a film to suggest discussion questions or to adjust the rental price to their ability to pay. Or to watch, year by year, how the audience for a film changes. I've come to realize that a lot of people aren't into that. I used to be more judgmental about it. I used to feel any filmmaker, particularly a political filmmaker, who didn't want to distribute was just off the wall. But now I see some people aren't into office work and keeping a schedule, and I guess I have to respect that.

KLEINHANS: What about the mechanical end of handling films and mailings?

REICHERT: There are places that do warehousing. They keep all your prints, clean and hotsplice them, make bookings by phone and mail, send confirmations, send bills, and send you a copy so you know who's getting it. That makes it possible for us. Otherwise we'd be running to the post office and doing all the paperwork. Ours is called Transit Media in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, and they're really good. For mailing lists you have to psych out what your potential audience will be. Also you can decide to reach an audience if you want. At one point we decided to try women's prisons so we did a mailing and got a fair response. Of course we showed the films for free. That's the kind of control you have with your own distribution.

LESAGE: What about audience? Did the people in New Day have the same interest in audience you did?

REICHERT: After a year of it being the four of us we decided to expand. We started screening films and everyone had to agree on a film before the coop could accept it. We saw JOYCE AT 34 by Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill and really liked it. We also felt good about the two filmmakers. So in 1973 Joyce and Claudia became New Day members. Now we have the new films of Amalie and Liane's NOT SO YOUNG NOW AS THEN.

At our January 1975 coop meeting we made what Jim and I feel was a really significant decision. We decided to accept a film by and about men into New Day. This came out of several discussions in the past year about our definition of a "feminist film." What we as filmmakers are

trying to do is see that sexism affects everyone and how it is related to the social, economic and political institutions that affect all people. We all feel now that feminism encompasses more than “women’s issues.” So, the film MEN'S LIVES made perfect sense as a feminist film.

KLEIN: The question of more men in New Day also required lots of discussion. It will be interesting to see how this affects the coop in the months to come. At our last coop meeting we accepted three new films -- a real record for us. This came after very lengthy discussion of expanding the size of the coop. These films were YUDIE by Mirra Bank, CHRIS AND BERNIE, by Bonnie Friedman and Deborah Shaffer, and UNION MAIDS by us and Miles Mogulseque.

MARTINEAU: Have you been looking for more films? What kind of criteria do you have?

KLEIN: We don't have any rigid criteria. That's a hassle at times because people in the coop come from different places politically and have different political and technical standards. I think that what we've come to is that first of all a film has to have a feminist consciousness in one way or another. It has to deal with a feminist issue. Films made by women on any subject, or even made about women, aren't necessarily part of what we're doing if they don't have a feminist analysis. They also have to have a broad enough appeal that they can be successful as a mass film and not just within the women's movement.

REICHERT: They have to have some technical proficiency, but the coop isn't into saying a film has to be extremely polished.

MARTINEAU: Would you take a fiction film?

KLEIN: Sure. ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE is a fiction film. It's really based on how useful a film can be. That's obviously a political and partly personal judgment. Also we don't just sit in a screening room and decide. People in the coop take it out and show it to classes, women's centers, and other groups and get reactions.

REICHERT: We really check it out because we don't trust our sensibilities alone. The other half of the decision is the filmmaker, who has to be someone we can work with and we feel is going to be responsible.

MARTINEAU: Has anyone challenged you about men in a feminist cooperative, from a separatist view?

REICHERT: Not really.

MARTINEAU: What happens when you take New Day films around?

REICHERT: You see changes, both individually and in groups. I

remember I was showing films at an all women's group and afterwards a woman came up to me who was a Bell Telephone operator. She'd had no contact with the women's movement and had been dragged to the screening by a friend. She came up to me afterwards with this beautiful look on her face, like she'd just realized something. And she said, "I never realized that the women's movement was about change and politics." She was a working woman and had never seen any connection between herself and the women's movement. It was very clear she'd seen herself in the films.

The other thing that's very exciting is when a program of women's films is a catalyst in a community. I'd show a series of films and afterwards we'd talk about the films and the local situation. You'd see people groping and excited—women who hadn't met before talking for hours and then deciding to meet again. Consciousness raising groups, women's centers, and all kinds of activities around the country started with films being a catalyzing force.

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